



Trauma and the Bible: The Artist's Response

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Abstract

This essay explores how artists have used biblical themes and characters to convey the universal experiences of trauma, anguish, and suffering. In following or subverting standard iconographical conventions, they produced works of stunning originality that encourage the viewer to engage with the biblical texts they depicted in original and creative ways.

Key words

Trauma, Art, Exile, Diaspora, Suffering Servant, Man of Sorrows, *Imago pietatis*, Job, Binding of Isaac

Introduction

In contemporary biblical studies scholars have become increasingly interested in how psychological perspectives on stress, loss, and trauma can illuminate and enrich our understanding of a range of biblical texts, from both the Old and the New Testaments. They adapt the language, terminology, and categories created and used by psychologists and social scientists such as Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, Richard Tedeschi, and Lawrence Calhoun,¹ and they apply their findings to a good number of biblical themes and personages: the exodus, the fall of Jerusalem, the exile, the suffering of Job, the despair of Jeremiah, and episodes centered on the crucifixion of Christ and the reaction of the disciples to his death. The approaches used by these scholars are, naturally, text-centered since one of their main aims is to draw attention to the rich choice of language used by the various biblical authors in articulating experiences of loss and suffering and their rhetoric in calling for reform, renewal, and reconstruction in the face of dire calamity.

When it comes to exploring how artists have conceived of and expressed biblical experiences of loss, suffering, and trauma, the paradigms and categories of twentieth-century psychology, while

1 Ronnie Janoff-Bulman, *Shattered Assumptions: Towards a New Psychology of Trauma* (New York: Free Press, 1992); Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence G. Calhoun, *Trauma and Transformation: Growing in the Aftermath of Suffering* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1995).

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useful, can be constraining and limiting.² More relevant, and indeed essential, are the rich iconographical traditions, stretching out over several centuries, within which artists worked in very creative ways in order to portray the intense personal or communal suffering so eloquently articulated in the Bible. Biblical narratives that explore physical or mental suffering and trauma have been appropriated time and again by artists to express universal experiences of suffering, betrayal, and alienation, with which the viewer can readily identify. Not only were they at pains to ensure that the viewer could empathize with the subject, but, indeed, several artists wanted to identify in a very personal way with the sufferings of some of the biblical characters they painted. For example, it is said that the special position accorded to the prophet Jonah by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel shows that he identified in a special way with the sense of alienation felt by this prophet, while William Blake identified with another Old Testament theme: the suffering and rejection of the biblical Job. Vincent van Gogh, in his letters to his brother Theo, identified closely with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, Paul Gauguin with the Christ's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Marc Chagall with his frequently painted image of Jesus, the crucified Jew. Such associations are well worth exploring as a subject in itself, but in this essay I want to focus on three very important iconographical traditions that deal with loss, trauma, personal and communal alienation and, in some cases, reconstruction after a traumatic experience. The first of these focuses on the biblical experience of exile, the second on the tradition of the suffering Man of Sorrows, and the third on depictions of the trauma of Job.

The Trauma of Exile

In her article on "Post-traumatic Growth and the Origins of Early Christianity," Joanna Collicutt McGrath offers some useful perspectives on what should be included under the general heading of *trauma*, and several of these aspects can be applied equally to the theme of biblical exile.³ A traumatic event, she states, involves actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others, and the person's response must involve intense fear, helplessness, or horror. Trauma is conceived as an event-person complex, with personal appraisal of the meaning of the event implicit in its definition. Trauma is associated with discrete events. Psychological accounts of trauma emphasize the threat posed not only to physical survival, but also to core positive beliefs about the world or the self by the shattering of personal assumptions relating to benevolence, security, meaning, and self-worth, or the confirmation of converse negative assumptions. Dealing successfully with trauma essentially involves establishing a sense of the world as benevolent, meaningful, and safe, and the self as significant and valuable, even in the face of the experience of the traumatic event. The event must come to be understood in terms of pre-existing core beliefs or schemas of this sort, and if they cannot contain it, they have to change, either by gentle stretching or by radical reconstitution.

2 It has not been possible to include all the images in this essay. However, they are readily available on the Internet, and those from art galleries are often accompanied by detailed explanatory and contextual notes.

3 Joanna Collicutt McGrath, "Post-traumatic Growth and the Origins of Early Christianity," *Mental Health, Religion, and Culture* 9 (2006): 291–306.

Given McGrath's definition, the notion of exile, both literal and metaphorical, that haunts the Hebrew Bible from beginning to end must surely be one of the most enduring examples of traumatic experience ever recorded. Walter Brueggemann, in a different context, suggests that the biblical concept of exile is a rich and supple metaphor that has several dimensions:

1. "Exiles must grieve their loss and express their resentful sadness about what was, and now is not, and will never be again."⁴ The exiles' trauma involves the culture of denial, which continues to imagine that things are the same. The first task among exiles is to represent the catastrophe, to state what is happening so that it can be faced up to. The Book of Lamentations is preoccupied with loss through its sustained language of negativity: "no resting place" (1:3); "no pasture" (1:6); "no-one to help" (1:7).
2. "Exile is the act of being orphaned"⁵ and rootless, forgotten, and forsaken (Lam 5:20).
3. "The greatest threat to exiles is the power of despair." There can be a double failure of faith: Israel doubts God's fidelity (Lam 5:20) and God's power to save (Isa 50:2). In exile, Israel is "without a God that makes any difference."⁶
4. Exile is an experience of "profaned absence." The absence of God is not only a personal emotional experience but also an institutional awareness in that the temple is no more.⁷
5. It is crucial is to get outside oneself and re-think, re-imagine, and re-describe a larger reality. The examples of Joseph and Daniel and the assurances of Second Isaiah (Isa 49:15–16; 54:10) and Jeremiah (31:31–34) show that it is possible to live again and reconstruct.⁸

Alan Mintz notes that, in exile, the task of the primal speaker (the poet, the prophet) is to attempt "first to represent the catastrophe and then to reconstruct, replace or redraw the threatened paradigm of meaning and thereby make creative survival possible."⁹ One should add here that the "primal speaker" of biblical trauma and catastrophe, and one of the most powerful and effective voices, has been the artist working through the medium of visual culture. It is the artist who is able to convey the impact of the experience of exile, whether literal or metaphorical, so strikingly and with such immediacy to the viewer. In terms of choice of biblical subject through which to explore concepts of exile and alienation, iconographical traditions focused very specifically on the story of

4 Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of Home: Preaching Among Exiles* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 4.

5 Ibid., 5.

6 Ibid., 6.

7 Ibid., 7.

8 Ibid., 10.

9 Alan Mintz, *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), 2.

the flight into Egypt (Matt 2:13–23) which has, by far, become one of the most painted subjects in the entire repertoire of Christian art.

Unique to Matthew, the story recounts how a family of refugees flees the violence of their homeland, finds safety in exile in a foreign land, and eventually returns to their homeland. It contains all the elements of extreme trauma: the massacre of innocent children, the agony of mothers, and the perilous escape of the child Jesus. Brief in its detail, it has received attention far beyond the limited space it occupies in the Gospel and became particularly popular in the twentieth century, a century characterized by exile. It was used to depict the vast displacements of people caused by wars throughout Europe and was depicted frequently by Marc Chagall to represent the flight of Jews from Hitler's Germany.

The narrative is informed by allusions to traumatic events from the Hebrew Bible, in particular the journey of Joseph to Egypt and the exile to Babylon. Verse 18 quotes Jer 31:15, which imagines Rachel weeping at Ramah, the site where the Israelites were gathered for the march into the Babylonian exile. Jesus, the refugee, thus recalls the experience of the Jewish people in their exile in Egypt and in their deportation to Babylon. Matthew suggests, through his structure of the story, that the experience of exile and diaspora must be viewed as punitive, temporary, and negative. However, in the rich reception history of the story, particularly in the apocryphal *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*, on which most artists have relied, there is a tendency to reconstruct, to reflect on the significance of the episode and its potential positive outcomes. So, for example, the Coptic Orthodox Church in Egypt associates its origins and very existence with the period of Jesus' exile in Egypt, while in artistic tradition, the focus is on the *journey* to Egypt and the many miracles that happened on the way. Great emphasis is placed on the opportunities that the perilous circumstances offered to demonstrate divine providence and protection. In visual culture, the journey quickly became a metaphorical journey, and the viewer was invited to identify with the perils facing the child Jesus on his way to Egypt. The flight into Egypt thus becomes, as it were, a spiritual pilgrimage through life.

Typical of how this was portrayed in art is the panel from a wooden altarpiece of 1518, by the so-called "Master of 1518" (National Gallery, London), which focuses on the positive experience of the journey to Egypt.¹⁰ The same treatment of the story is evident in paintings by Gerard David (1510) and the Master of the Female Half-Lengths (1515), both in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

A particularly interesting interpretation is found in stained glass from the early twelfth century above the Royal Portal in Chartres Cathedral, where the story is depicted in five narrative panels. The family is welcomed into Sotinen in Egypt, where the governor of that city, Aphrodisius, welcomes the Christ child and offers security to the family. His welcome contrasts with the cruelty of the despot Herod. Artists have not generally been concerned with the return of Jesus to his

¹⁰ Many of the works of art mentioned in this essay may be viewed at <http://www.artres.com>.

homeland. Rather, they suggest that through danger and death, new life is promised, and the viewer is invited to give new meaning to a traumatic event and to view exile, whether literal or metaphorical, as an opportunity to rebuild and reconstruct. However, the tragic and traumatic aspects of exile and displacement could also be expressed through this same image, as can be seen in three typical examples by the artists Artemisia Gentileschi, Pablo Picasso, and Marc Chagall.

In Gentileschi's *Rest on the Flight into Egypt* (ca. 1570, Birmingham Art Gallery, United Kingdom), the immediate impact of the large canvas is quite striking. The artist strips away any sentimentality and situates the episode in a setting that highlights the bleakness, isolation, and poverty of the refugee family. There is no natural landscape, no source of food or water, and the family's possessions are contained in one small sack. A large decaying wall covers almost a third of the canvas, and a menacingly tempestuous sky is symbolic of the violent trauma unfolding in Bethlehem, from which the family has escaped. Yet, despite the negative elements in the painting, there are also positive aspects that suggest hope for the future: the brightness in the dark sky; the allusions to the Eucharist in the detail of the Christ child feeding at the breast of the Virgin; and two episodes associated with the death of Christ, seen as a salvific event—the large donkey anticipates the journey of Christ to Jerusalem (Matt 21:1–11), while the exhausted body of Joseph is reminiscent of Renaissance scenes of the deposition of Christ from the cross.

Pablo Picasso's *Poverty* (1903, The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester, United Kingdom), painted during his so-called "blue period," characterized by his preoccupation with the poor and destitute, anticipates the importance of the theme throughout the entire twentieth century. In *Poverty*, painted with a palette of blue, the frail and destitute family bears a strong resemblance to the traditional image of the family on the flight into Egypt. The sense of despair in much of Picasso's work at this time has been associated with his intense grief at the suicide of his friend Carlos Casegames in 1901. The trauma of the scene is reflected in the skull-like appearance of the heads of both mother and child.

But, above all, it was Marc Chagall who appropriated the subject in such a way as to reflect the real and the raw trauma of exile and alienation experienced by Jews in World War Two.¹¹ Chagall's personal identification with the subject of the flight into Egypt can be seen in *Obsession* (1943, private collection). Here, the mother and child are in a wagon hitched to a blue horse, and they escape from a burning building in Russia, symbolized by the green-domed church and the men bearing a red flag at the upper right. The image was inspired partly by the story of the artist's mother, who was removed on her bed from the house, which burned down at the time of the artist's birth. *Obsession* also symbolized the darkest days of the war and parallels the crushing of the Warsaw Ghetto revolt. The whole world goes up in flames, and a green lifeless Jesus lies helpless in the streets of the burning ghetto, mourned by the matriarch Rachel in the blazing sky above. Beside him, a bearded Jew holds aloft the candelabrum normally used to illuminate the cross, but

11 For detailed discussion on this and other examples of Holocaust art, see Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation: The Influence of the Holocaust on the Visual Arts* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1993).

now one of its branches, the green one, which parallels the green Christ, totters, its flames darkened, symbolizing that a life has been extinguished. On the right, Chagall sets his symbols of hope, the mother and child fleeing from the burning house. But their grinning satanic mule refuses to move, so that their escape is blocked, and the child—Chagall himself—realizing this, covers his face in his hands. Above them the Red Army comes to the rescue, but these staggering soldiers are unarmed, and they too seem consumed by flames.

In *Obsession*, Chagall powerfully and dramatically subverts traditional Christian iconography of the theme. The absence of Joseph is noticeable, as it leaves the mother and child especially vulnerable. In traditional iconography, pagan gods fall off their plinths as the family passes by, but here it is the icon of the crucified Christ that tumbles in front of the mule, blocking its way. The crucified Christ, the Christian icon symbolizing the power of God to save, falls down helplessly, the colors of the lifeless body implying that Jesus is well and truly dead, beyond revival, and so, powerless to defend. The background, far from suggesting a unified landscape of peace and calm, as in traditional iconography, is literally on fire, the flames about to envelop the mother and child. Rachel, very rarely included in Christian iconography of this scene, floats high above and mourns deeply, as she does in Matthew's account of the episode. By using familiar Christian symbols and including the matriarch Rachel, Chagall speaks to Christian viewers of the plight of Jews in imagery familiar to Christians. Jesus becomes the martyred, innocent Jew who also represents the powerlessness of the Christian God to save in times of trauma; not only is he a fallen, ineffective idol, but his lifeless body blocks the escape of the Jewish family. The Christian West, like their God, is either powerless or lacks the will to save the Jews in their plight.

The Traumatized Man of Sorrows

Imagining and portraying the trauma of the passion and death of Christ to elicit the empathy of the viewer has been a major preoccupation of, and challenge to, Christian artists throughout the centuries. The trauma of the crucifixion had to reflect, in some way, the social situations in which the paintings were conceived and in which the viewers lived and frequently suffered. Grünewald's *Crucifixion*, from the Isenheim Altarpiece (1512–1516), was seen daily by those suffering from dreaded skin diseases; they could empathize with the body of the crucified Christ, his body pitted with plague-type sores (Fig. 1). For his *Crucifixion* (1946, St. Matthew's Church, Northampton, United Kingdom), the English artist Graham Sutherland used photographs of dead bodies from the concentration camps. In his painting, Sutherland highlights the raw suffering of Christ, who is still in the process of dying; his fingers curl up in agony, while his taut arms pull the ribcage away from the rest of the body.

The most enduring iconographical tradition in this respect was undoubtedly that of the Man of Sorrows, the *vir dolorum*, which depicts the trauma of Christ through the lens of the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, an enigmatic poem that elevates the mysterious and unknown servant, who suffers on behalf of the sins of others in a most traumatic manner and eventually suffers an untimely death. David Clines has drawn attention to the timeless nature of this poem:



Figure 1. Mathias Grünewald (1455–1528), Detail of Christ from *The Crucifixion* from the Isenheim Altarpiece. Musée d'Unterlinden. Photo credit: Bridgeman-Giraudon/Art Resource, New York.

The poem exists to create another world, a world that is recognizably our own, with brutality and suffering and God and a coming to see on the part of some but not a world that simply existed and is gone for good. The poem's very lack of specificity refuses to let it be tied down to one spot on the globe or frozen in history; it opens up the possibility that the poem can become true in a variety of circumstances—that is its work. The poem is free to do its work by its very lack of specificity; its subject becomes true in a variety of circumstances.¹²

The aspect of timelessness and universality that permeates the poem in Isaiah 53 became the most essential characteristic with regard to how the Man of Sorrows has been depicted in art. In traditional iconography, the image, synonymous with the figure of Christ, is removed from any narrative context in the Gospels; unmoored from specific incidents associated with the passion or resurrection of Christ, the figure becomes universal and timeless. Freed from the figure's narrative context, the artist could concentrate on evoking an atmosphere of intimacy and immediacy between the Man of Sorrows and the viewer. The iconography becomes restricted, and there are few, if any, symbols that refer to Christ's divinity, thus encouraging the viewer to engage with the human suffering of this traumatized figure. Sympathy for the rejected figure is aroused by the vivid and lurid depiction of physical suffering and unseemly wounds.

The *imago pietatis*, "the image of sorrow," by which such imagery was known, became some of the most popular of all devotional images throughout medieval and early Renaissance Europe. These artworks depict Christ wounded, bleeding, and dead in the tomb, yet paradoxically alive, upright, and suffering, animated by a mysterious life force. He is usually alone, an isolated and rejected human figure lacking any divine attributes, sometimes upheld by two angels who present him to the viewer. Detached and frozen in time, the image transfixes the viewer in what Caroline

12 David J. A. Clines, *I, He, We, and They: A Literary Approach to Isaiah 53* (JSOTSup 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1976), 61.



Figure 2. Jan Mostaert, *The Man of Sorrows* (ca. 1520). Found in the collection of the State A Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow. Photo credit: HIP/Art Resource, NY.

Bynum Walker describes as a simultaneity of opposites:¹³ on the one hand, the figure's pathetic and traumatic state appeals directly to our sense of pity and compassion and, on the other, denounces the viewer as a perpetrator of crimes against the just and innocent man. The *imago pietatis*, with its pitiful yet reproving gaze, was frequently inscribed with the text of Lam 1:12, "Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger."

The figure of the *imago pietatis* could be interpreted quite flexibly, especially in the later Middle Ages, when the popularity of the image was at its height. The artist depicted a uniform facial format on which the pious beholder could impose his or her personal detail. There was, then, considerable scope for the imagination when viewers contemplated the image before them, since they were expected to identify personally and imaginatively with the Man of Sorrows, so that the power of the image could effect a transformation in their lives. The notion of the transfer of suffering onto the servant in Isaiah 53 was communicated very vividly and almost tangibly in the image. Detached from any narrative, the image transfixes the viewer with a spectacular surplus of blood, wounds, and pain as objects for contemplative immersion, almost unbearable to behold, yet salvific.

Two examples, one by Dutch artist Jan Mostaert (1520, National Gallery, London) and the other by Italian painter Andrea Mantegna (1470, Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen), convey the sense of trauma experienced by the Man of Sorrows. In Mostaert's image (Fig. 2), the artist includes the *arma Christi*, the instruments of Christ's suffering—the crown of thorns, the reed thrust on him by the Roman soldiers, and the birch with which he was flogged—to encourage the viewer to reflect more intensely on the figure's sufferings. Christ's gaze engenders a sense of guilt in the viewer; tears stream from his face in large crystal beads as he looks directly at the viewer, his lips slightly parted, as if about to speak words of reproach and disappointment. The artist has used every means possible to induce feelings of compassion and contrition in the viewer, from the small scale of the image, which already assumes intimacy, to the catch-lights in the tear-filled eyes. The drooping of the figure's shoulders reflects the plaintive character of the painting. In Mantegna's version, the artist emphasizes the timelessness of the image by isolating the figure in a void between death and resurrection; the landscape is delicately bisected to evoke an important pivotal moment between crucifixion and resurrection. Frozen in the anguish and trauma of death, the painting nevertheless includes a note of hope by depicting the dawn about to break, symbolizing the resurrection, in the distant background.

13 Caroline Bynum Walker, "Violent Imagery in Late Medieval Piety," *German Historical Institute Bulletin* 30 (2002): 3–36 (6).

Vincent van Gogh, throughout his life, identified with the servant in Isaiah 53 both personally and artistically, and he referred to himself as “the man of sorrows and acquainted with grief” (usually writing this quotation in English) many times in his letters to his brother Theo. The notion of earthly suffering and self-sacrifice in the service of others, to be followed by eventual recognition, made the Man of Sorrows a powerful and attractive symbol to van Gogh, and he regarded his own sufferings—and suffering in general—as something that should be not merely endured, but celebrated. His still life painting of Isaiah 53 conveys this point.¹⁴ *Still Life with Open Bible* (1885, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam) depicts a large Bible open at Isaiah 53 and set on a table with a burnt-down candle in the background. In the foreground is a copy of a novel with a yellow cover, *La Joie de vivre*, by Émile Zola (1884). Van Gogh positions the open text of the Bible directly in front of the viewer, so that we become both reader and interpreter. But the presence of Zola’s novel placed strategically between text and reader ensures that we interpret the text through the novel and its main character, the selfless heroine Pauline Quenu. A deliberate association is made between the Suffering Servant and the young heroine, both of whom experience intense trauma and suffering. The irony of the novel’s title, *La Joie de vivre* (English trans., “The Joy of Living”), underscores the notion that Pauline Quenu, despite the trauma in her life, can reconstruct her life and find joy and fulfilment through her suffering. For van Gogh, the Man of Sorrows is reincarnated in this young female heroine.

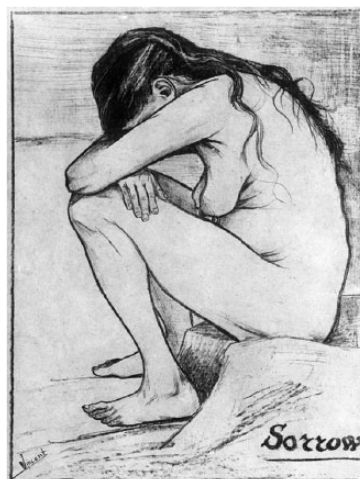


Figure 3. Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890), *Sorrow*. Lithograph. Photo credit: Bridgeman-Giraudon/ Art Resource, NY.

Van Gogh’s representations of suffering and trauma were not confined to this painting, however. In his letters to his brother Theo, he often notes that his preferred idea of God was not male but rather an idealized, compassionate maternal figure, who through devoted care brought joy to humanity; much of his imagery came from Isaiah, for example 49:15, where God is compared to a nursing mother: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion to the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you.” It was to the image of woman that van Gogh turned to explore the notion of sorrow and suffering, and to one woman in particular, Sien Hoornik, his prostitute wife, whom he described, in language reminiscent of Isaiah, as a withered tree that has been blasted by a cold dry wind.¹⁵ Sien was his model for the dejected and abandoned woman depicted in his drawing, *Sorrow* (1882, The New Art Gallery, Walsall, United Kingdom), in which the image of young withering plant shoots form the background (Fig. 3). The theme of the

14 For an appraisal of the importance of this theme for van Gogh, see Anton Wessels, *A Kind of Bible: Vincent van Gogh as Evangelist* (London: SCM, 2000).

15 “I found her looking withered—literally like a tree with fresh greenery that a dry, cold wind has swept over, making the buds shrivel.” Excerpt from a letter to the artist’s brother Theo, dated 12 February 1883. Letter 313 in the online archive of van Gogh letters: <http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let313/letter.html>.

abandoned woman is highlighted at the bottom of the drawing in a reference to the novel *La Femme* by the contemporaneous writer Michelet, “How can there be on earth a woman so alone and so abandoned?”¹⁶

Van Gogh intended that the drawing should express more than the plight of Sien and stated that it referred to the “struggle of life” in general. In caring for Sien, the artist frequently used the image of God as a compassionate husband from Isa 54:5. It is tempting to propose that in the figure *Sorrow*, the artist may have been inspired by the suffering and trauma of the unidentified and abandoned woman at the start of Isaiah 54, whose future happiness God affirms, in language of compassion and affection. Scholars have long since drawn attention to how Isaiah 53 and 54 are best read together. Peter Quinn-Miscall notes how both poems, taken together, reveal the surprising and traumatic treatment that one chosen by God might have to undergo and the tensions that exist between expectations of justice and mercy.¹⁷ In *Sorrow*, we have a figure that speaks to the viewer powerfully and eloquently of trauma, rejection, abandonment, and suffering and that visualizes the plight of the female servant within the context of the rich iconographical tradition of the Man of Sorrows.

The Transformation of Job’s Trauma

In identifying suitable case studies from the Bible where contemporary trauma theory might be profitably applied, scholars invariably choose Job. Samuel Balentine sums up Job’s dilemma in his discussion of the enigmatic phrase “for no reason”; this indeed is Job’s essential challenge, as he suffers for no good reason, and his traumatic situation seems to defy any plausible explanation.¹⁸ It is this plight that artists have sought to convey in their depictions of the life of Job. In illuminated Greek and Latin Bibles of the Middle Ages, Job was generally depicted in the grip of physical pain and agonized by his wife’s alienation and the remoteness of God. His distress was seen as a mirror of the human condition. The grotesque figure of “Satan” as the devil reflected Job’s inner fears and misery. Biblical manuscript miniaturists sought to portray the throes of Job in the light of their own age: the fantastic imagery that haunted the medieval imagination served to exteriorize the dread of disease and death. More than material and social, more than physical and moral, Job’s is a spiritual pain; he sees God alone as the possible source and explanation of his suffering. At the same time, despite his insufferable anguish, there is often a note of hope in these miniature drawings: the miniatures generally depict Job looking upward as he rests his head securely on his closed right fist.¹⁹

16 Jules Michelet, *La Femme* (Paris: Hachette, 1860).

17 Peter Quinn-Miscall, *Reading Isaiah: Poetry and Vision* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 200–3.

18 Samuel E. Balentine, “Traumatizing Job,” *RevExp* 105 (2008): 213–26; idem, “For No Reason,” *Int* 57 (2003): 349–69.

19 See Samuel Terrien, *The Iconography of Job through the Centuries: Artists as Biblical Interpreters* (University Park, PA: Penn State University Press, 1996).

The figure of Job, wracked with pain and full of resentment, appears frequently in Holocaust art.²⁰ In Abraham Rattner's *Lamentation* (1944), Job's yellow body is lacerated with red wounds and scarred in a way that recalls not only his sores but also the marks of flagellation on the body of Christ. Job was invariably depicted with his head turned sharply to the heavens, his mouth wide open, while his Holocaust context was emphasized by means of his emaciated body.



Figure 4. William Blake (1757–1827), *Satan Smiting Job with Sore Boils*. Pen and ink with tempera on mahogany. Tate Gallery. Photo credit: Tate, London/Art Resource, NY.

Perhaps the best known, if also the most enigmatic, of all depictions of Job came from the hand of William Blake (1757–1827). Blake was fascinated by the character of Job, and towards the end of his life he produced two similar sets of engravings illustrating the book of Job that have come to be recognized as his masterpieces. David Hiles argues that nearly a century before the emergence of the discipline of modern psychology, and at least one hundred and fifty years before Carl Jung wrote his *Answer to the Book of Job* (1952), Blake was calling upon his own lived experience to interpret the book of Job in these series of remarkable illustrations (example, Fig. 4).²¹ Hiles explains that in these illustrations, a view emerges of the human response to suffering that is far richer and far more subtle than anything modern psychology has as yet developed. Blake's illustrations are not simple accompaniments to the text; they interpret and extend it. They clearly offer an authentic expression of Blake's own suffering and how he came to understand it. Through his detailed engravings, Blake inserts emphasis, commentary, and interpretation, and on several occasions adds plates that have no direct correspondence to the text at all.

Hiles argues that Blake makes a significant departure from the biblical text in terms of both the structure and the emphasis of his series of illustrations. Rather than concentrate on the cycle of speeches that occupy approximately thirty-four of the forty-two chapters, Blake seems to concentrate on Job's *experience*, and the process by which Job is gradually transformed.²² Most of Blake's plates illustrate the first and last four chapters of the book. Hiles argues that the carefully planned

20 See Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 164–65.

21 David Hiles, "Jung, William Blake and Our Answer to Job." Accessed June 26, 2014. <http://psy.dmu.ac.uk/drhiles/pdf%27s/Microsoft%20Word%20-%20Jung%20paper.web.pdf>.

22 Ibid., 12.

arrangement of the illustrations supports a seven-stage process of transformation in the life of Job:²³

1. Attachment (*Plates 1–3*)

Suffering and the grieving of loss are motivated by *attachment* to material objects and events. This attachment is for the most part unconscious. Job's wealth can be seen as reward for his piety and uprightness, but this same wealth makes the potential for the experience of loss far greater. There is superficiality to Job's world.

2. Loss (*Plates 4–6*)

Loss is the conscious awareness of the break from an attached object. In Plate 4, Job becomes conscious of the *loss* that has now befallen him.

3. Denial (*Plates 7–9*)

Job's three friends act out *denial*. They try to account for his misfortune by searching for a reason, claiming there must be some cause or sin that he has committed to justify this punishment.

4. Abandonment (*Plates 10–12*)

Job's experience of *abandonment* turns to torment in his loneliest moment in Plate 11. At the top of this plate, Blake represents God's tragic contradictoriness, with the figure of God entwined by the serpent, a recurring theme in Blake's poetry, drawings, and paintings.

5. Insight (*Plates 13–15*)

Confrontation and working through despair leads to *insight* and revelation. Job experiences this in Plate 13 as a vision of God appearing out of the whirlwind. The outstretched arms of God in Plates 13 and 14 signify how God's creation includes everything. Crucially this includes the interplay of opposites: light and dark, above and below, joy and suffering. Job realizes that everything has been placed in the world for a reason.

6. Acceptance (*Plates 16–18*)

Insight becomes transformed in the experience of *acceptance*. Job is transformed by his acceptance, and his faith is rewarded and strengthened. His unconscious doubts fall away.

7. Return (*Plates 19–21*)

The transformation experienced by the acceptance of the meaning of suffering is marked by an outward *return*—an expression of grace and giving back so that others can learn from the experience. Job's full understanding is expressed through his humility in Plate 19, and in Plate 20 as a *Return*, in recounting the story of his experiences to his daughters.

23 Ibid., 14–17.

Blake painted many other scenes from the life of Job. All of them illustrate his deep and lasting personal engagement with the sentiments expressed in the book of Job, and, as Hiles suggests, his valuable reflections may well have anticipated “trauma” readings of the book of Job many decades before it became popular to do so.²⁴

The Binding of Isaac

By way of conclusion, one should mention a final text, Genesis 22, a narrative often commented upon in the context of trauma theory and its application to the Bible. The trauma experienced by Abraham in sacrificing his son, the experience of Isaac as victim, the reader’s bafflement as to why God would demand such a sacrifice in the first place, and the Christian interpretation of the passage as prefiguring Christ’s crucifixion have all contributed to making this passage fertile ground for Christian artists. But it was also a particularly important text and theme in Holocaust art, and two examples provide good illustrations of this: Marc Chagall’s *Yellow Crucifixion* (1942) and Mordecai Ardon’s *Sarah* (1947).²⁵

In Chagall’s *Yellow Crucifixion*, the artist juxtaposes a Torah scroll with the crucified Christ. The scroll opens to reveal images of slaughter, suggesting the Old Testament prefiguration of the crucifixion. The scene on the scroll seems to merge the sacrifice of Isaac, suggested by the hand holding the knife, with the New Testament story of the massacre of the infants, related to the flight into Egypt at the bottom of the painting. To reinforce the connection to the sacrifice of Isaac, Chagall drew a horned, animal-headed man who holds on to Christ’s other arm, a combined image of Isaac and the ram. The desperate meaning of these images is further emphasized by two figures who appear directly to the left of the Torah scroll, a bearded father and his young son—Abraham and Isaac—both of whom are wrapped in winding clothes like mummies. Chagall hints here that everyone is sacrificed: Abraham, Isaac, Christ, the ram, and all the other innocent victims.

The second example is Mordecai Ardon’s *Sarah* (see cover illustration). Here, Isaac’s pale, bloodless body lies dead on the altar, while Abraham sits helpless in the background, head in hand, his sleeves bloody from the sacrifice. He is a tiny figure of despair, a footnote to Sarah, who dominates the foreground in mourning her dead son in a manner that recalls the Pietà. Ardon incorporates in his painting the legend that the devil brought Sarah to witness the sacrifice of her son, thus causing her death. Sarah is as pale as the dead son, and her bright red dress seems to have absorbed the blood. It is not just a son that has died, but a nation. The discarded ladder is a reference to the biblical episode of Jacob’s dream, where a ladder ascends to heaven, but now the discarded ladder evokes the cutting off of all communication with God. It is against the perversity of God that Sarah cries out.

²⁴ Ibid., 1.

²⁵ For a full discussion of these paintings, see Amishai-Maisels, *Depiction and Interpretation*, 164.

Conclusion

The artists included in this essay, and the many others not included, demonstrate that the experience of trauma and alienation was, and is, an appealing subject to artists. Like the biblical prophets and poets who articulated personal and communal trauma and its aftermath in moving and eloquent speech, so too artists across the centuries, through the media of painting, sculpture, and stained glass, have represented scenes of suffering and inexpressible anguish with great immediacy, pathos, and sensitivity. Ever conscious of the iconographical traditions within which they worked, artists have produced, at the same time, unique works of art that still have the power to speak to us today.

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